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ABSTRACT

After presenting an argument for a liberal arts education for media students, this report describes the mass communication education program at DePauw University for which students must take coursework in at least five of six areas of study: natural sciences and mathematics, social and behavioral sciences, literature and the arts, historical and philosophical understanding, foreign language, and self-expression. The paper lists students' practical experiences in the mass communication education program, including participation in the campus FM radio station, a video production unit, or in off-campus internships. Finally, the report describes DePauw's Center for Contemporary Media, whose function is to benefit all students regardless of academic interest, provide a more intensive experience for students planning careers in the media, and support the development of future media practitioners through up-to-date print, radio, and television facilities. (SRT)

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A LIBERAL ARTS PURIST APPROACH TO MEDIA EDUCATION

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The value of providing future mass communicators a broad-based liberal arts education before they embark on their media careers is now gaining near universal acceptance. For an institution's mass communication program to be accredited, the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication requires that three fourths of an undergraduate student's coursework be outside of the major field of study. This means, of course, general studies in arts and sciences. Participants in the University of Oregon "Futures Study" on journalism education agreed strongly "that journalism and mass communication education must rely on a strong relationship with the liberal arts and sciences. (1)"

Many observers are now also quick to point out the practical utility of a liberal arts foundation when competing in the mass communication industry jobs arena. Stone makes this point in addressing future broadcast communicators: "It's easier to teach skills to an educated person on the job than to educate a skilled practitioner who missed out on a liberal arts education in school. (2)" Barze indicates that liberally educated communicators have an advantage when it is time for promotion.

> "The most obvious 'plus' these workers had was an overall liberal arts education that signalled they knew how to learn and conduct research, while assuring their ability to make decisions in a logical and satisfactory manner. (3)"

And Bryce points out how "specialty reporting" in television has developed a need for mass communicators with an extensive background in government, health, agriculture, or economics. (4)

But beyond this general agreement on the need for a liberal arts approach, it becomes difficult to accurately assess and define how that approach can be incorporated into media education settings, or perhaps even how we define "liberal arts" in the first place. The question must be asked as to whether we all mean the same thing when we say "liberal arts." In theory, a nodding consensus can probably be had on a definition such as presented by Eastman:

> "A traditional liberal arts education should teach students (1) to learn how to learn, (2) to evaluate, and (3) to communicate. Subject matter content should function primarily as vehicles for learning how to understand, measure, evaluate, utilize and convey concepts, factual material, creative insights and methods of analysis." (5)

The overriding question, however, might be whether this liberal arts talk, nice as it is, is being put into practice by those in charge of educating future media practitioners. It hardly seems sufficient to assume a future mass communicator is liberally educated just because that student takes a certain amount of coursework outside of the major discipline. Indeed, that approach simply tosses the liberal arts burden into the laps of colleagues in other departments on campus.

Thus, the discussion needs to focus not on whether mass communication education needs the liberal arts framework, but to what degree and in what atmosphere. This discussion must be done at both the campus and departmental levels.

LIBERAL ARTS INSTITUTIONS ENTER MEDIA EDUCATION

A number of traditional liberal arts colleges and universities are taking up the challenge of this discussion, and asserting themselves in the education of future mass communicators by playing their trump card -- a historical and working dedication to liberally educating their students. These liberal arts institutions, such as Trinity University, Ithaca College, DePauw University, and others, may well be at the forefront of revising the way mass communicators are educated for the industry. These schools, generally privately funded and with manageable numbers of students, are in the unique and desireable position to be able to accomplish what so many media professionals and educators say must be done -- educating "whole" people who can entertain and inform through the media to the public with insight, perspective, creativity, and responsibility.

The moves by liberal arts institutions may be coming at the right time, given some key indications that larger, state-supported journalism schools may be redirecting their emphases. The University of Oregon study on journalism education predicts, "In the future, it is likely that undergraduate education will be de-emphasized somewhat..." (at the larger j-schools) in comparison to continuing education, research, and graduate education. (6) And while these are certainly worthy functions, the deemphasis in undergraduate education indicates a void could be created. This void, it seems, could be filled by liberal arts universities where undergraduate education, the sole reason for being, will never be deemphasized.

The efforts in media education by liberal arts institutions may also be coming at this time because they may simply believe they can best prepare the kind of mass communicator society and the profession want. It is no secret that customary journalism schools have been taken to task in recent months. The Oregon study provided a dismal assessment of the state of j-school education:

> "In the midst of what has been called a communication revolution, the nation's journalism/mass communication schools seemed anything but revolutionary. Indeed, there was abundant evidence that they were nearly stagnant....Although journalism schools had begun with lofty ideals and great expectations for advancement of the press and the public, many were little more than industry-oriented trade schools by the 1970's and 1980's."(7)

The recently completed "American Journalist Seminar" at Indiana University also reflected some disappointments with the current state of journalism education. It told of a study that showed that journalism schools ranked only fifth in journalists' rankings of positive influences on their ethical structures. Sharon Murphy, the dean of the College of Journalism at Marquette University argued that journalism education does no better job in preparing future reporters for meaningful and ethical communication than was done twenty years ago. She also charged journalism schools with a preoccupation with the bottom line, grants, technology, and such.(8)

While it would certainly be presumptuous to suggest that liberal arts colleges will suddenly cure all ills in undergraduate mass communication education, it is at least clear that these institutions will take a different angle on the matter. In the atmosphere of these traditional liberal arts universities, students can study the media in classes small enough to allow interaction and discussion with the professor and fellow students. Thus, aesthetic and ethical matters can be delved into more deeply. In this atmosphere of more modest class sizes, students can be required to write papers and conduct group projects that will be evaluated by their professors. Students are taught, even at the freshman level, by professors who will be evaluated themselves mostly for their work with students and in teaching. In this atmosphere, students can, even as underclassmen, have ready access to work in cocurricular media activities, including usually a campus newspaper, radio station, and local cable access television. In this atmosphere, a large proportion of students can assume leadership or managerial roles in the operation of the cocurriuclar media outlets. In short, the liberal arts atmosphere that has effectively served to educate and prepare so many pre-professional students for careers in law, medicine, business, science, and ministry, can now be applied to preparing the next generation of professional mass communicators.

None of the foregoing discussion, however, is to suggest that the study of mass communication can be instantly incorporated into liberal arts institutions where vocational and/or trendy programs are viewed with skepticism, if not with disgust. And given the history of media education as being vocational and hardware oriented, this dim view by liberal arts academics can be understood. Blanchard and Christ appropriately recommend "hard-nosed soul-searching about fundamental purposes" of journalism and mass communication units as the campus political battle takes shape. Otherwise, they warn, mass communication "offerings could be perceived... as being too vocational or specialized and, as a result, not appropriate to the reform movement back to 'basics' of general and liberal arts and sciences education."(9)

But this opposition can be confronted in two ways. First, the study of mass communication must be approached like any other liberal study, with concepts, critical insight, and discussion and analysis of issues. Media courses must deal more with "why" than simply "how to." Secondly, the media system must be viewed for what it is -- a most pervasive means of touching and affecting every individual in contemporary society. Given this pervasiveness, knowing and understanding the media in American society is as important to every citizen as is an awareness and appreciation of political science, literature, history, sociology, and the arts.

DEPAUW UNIVERSITY AND THE STUDY OF MASS COMMUNICATION

It is easy to view DePauw University as a model liberal arts and sciences institution. Its midwestern, small town, low enrollment (2300 students) and church affiliation all support this characterization. DePauw ranks among the nation's leaders in the proportion of its graduates who go on to earn a terminal degree. The academic program is designed to diversify each student's plan of study. Distribution requirements guarantee that each student take coursework in at least five of six areas of study, or "groups." The six "groups" are: natural sciences and mathematics, social and behavioral sciences, literature and the arts, historical and philosophical understanding, foreign language, and self-expression. In addition, students must demonstrate "competencies" by passing specially designated courses in writing, quantitative reasoning, and oral communication. Finally, students must complete four winter term projects. Winter term is a month (January) of independent study or internship to allow students to focus attention over four weeks on one particular area of interest.

A liberal arts or generalist perspective is also found within the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences. Media students will, of course, take mass communication coursework within the department in broadcast journalism, media and society, broadcast management, media law, and production. But students are also required to broaden their communication coursework by studying in at least two of the three other areas of the department, including rhetoric/public address, theatre/ interpretation, and voice science. All students complete their major with a senior seminar which highlights the generalist approach to communication by reviewing the unique contributions of each aspect of the discipline, integrating the commonalities, and conducting a research project on a matter of particular interest.

An effort is made to integrate the liberal arts approach into the particular mass communication courses, and not simply leave that liberalizing function up to the rest of the campus. Broadcast journalism students not only learn to report, but to write clearly, assess the impact of news, understand the implications of the First Amendment, and confront ethical decisions. Management students deal with case studies, and conduct audience research and analysis. Even production classes focus largely on aesthetics and the message orientation. Much of a student's practical experience comes in cocurricular activities with the campus FM radio station, the video production unit, or in off-campus internships, often during winter term. At DePauw, there is no question of whether the emphasis is on liberal arts OR careerism. The liberal arts approach is seen AS careerism.

DePauw is proud of its media heritage, which includes the founding on campus of Sigma Delta Chi as a national journalism organization in 1909. WGRE-FM, the campus radio station, was the first station to receive an educational broadcasting license from the FCC. DePauw has produced a number of professional mass communicators for both the print and broadcast world, including John McWethy, ABC television's state department correspondent, and John Owen, managing editor of Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's television news. DePauw alums who are leaders in the print industry include Robert Giles, editor of the Rochester TIMES-UNION, and Rance Crain, president of Crain Communications Inc.

THE DEPAUW CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Financial gifts have been commited to DePauw University to establish the Center for Contemporary Media. The unique aspect of the Center will be its deliberate emphasis on a program to benefit all DePauw students, regardless of academic interest. DePauw Chancellor Richard Rosser calls the Center an alternative approach, "For the first time in America in a liberal arts setting, tomorrow's leaders will have the opportunity to learn about all forms of the media. No liberally educated person can function in this day and age without an understanding of the profound impact of the media on society." This commitment to media literacy for all students is particularly important when one considers that the Oregon study suggested that opportunities for non-majors to study media are becoming more limited at many institutions, "Service courses to the rest of the university, once an important contribution to general education, have diminished greatly."(10)

The Center will also provide a more intensive experience for students planning careers in the media. The Center will provide modern facilities to support coursework in both print and broadcast media. The Center will also house student media outlets which provide opportunities for practical applications of coursework in a cocurricular setting.

The Center will not, however, offer particular media courses, create a journalism or broadcasting major, or merely serve a warehouse function. The Center will accomplish its objectives in a facilitator fashion. First of all, the Center will annually sponsor a series of symposia and workshops to deal with the larger societal influences of the media. For example, a three day conference will look at the mutual influences between government/political leaders and the news media. An additional program could allow scholars of ethics and philosophy to assess the ethical frameworks of journalists and programmers. Other programs could look into the dissemination of scientific data to society, the historical perspective of media influences, psychology of advertising, etc. Thus, students from a variety of disciplines will have the opportunity to see how the media play a role in their respective fields of study. The Center will also facilitate and provide logistical and development support for the presentation of media modules or short courses that could be incorporated into a variety of departments. And of course, students of all majors have access to participate in any of the campus media outlets.

The Center will support the development of future media practitioners through several mechanisms. First, the Center will support an expansion of the communication faculty so as to allow a broader range of faculty expertise and more student/faculty contact in the media settings. The Center will also provide up-to-date print, radio, and television facilities with the appropriate supervisory and technical support. Scholarships for talented media students will allow those students the opportunity to prepare for media careers in the liberal arts environment. The Center will also provide a program to bring in visiting professionals to serve as guest editors and producers, working side by side with students for one to two weeks in the student-operated media outlets. Finally, Center personnel will be able to set up a mentor system for student media practitioners. In this way, students can receive direction and support in classroom and practical applications.

The Center also plans a faculty development program to provide media faculty the opportunity to keep their professional media skills current, or perhaps conduct research. The faculty development opportunities will extend to faculty from other disciplines as well so they might look into ways to expand their professional insights with regard to the media, and incorporate those perspectives into their classes.

While many of the Center's plans are still developing, it is clear that the Center can and will serve to, at the same time, educate future media practitioners and future media consumers, while upholding the liberal arts tradition. Certainly, the Center will experience growing pains as media education takes on a near all-campus approach, but these obstacles can be overcome by strict adherence to viewing media study for what it is -- our newest liberal art.

NOTES

1. PLANNING FOR CURRICULAR CHANGE IN JOURNALISM EDUCATION: PROJECT ON THE FUTURE OF JOURNALISM AND MASS COMMUNICATION EDUCATION. School of Journalism, University of Oregon, May, 1984.

2. Vernon A. Stone, CAREERS IN BROADCAST NEWS, booklet prepared for the Radio Television News Directors Association, 1985.

3. Keith E. Barze, "Educating Communicators in the Eighties," RADIOACTIVE, volume 12, number 5, May, 1986, p. 12.

4. E. Scott Bryce, "Campus Concerns: Getting That First News Job," RTNDA COMMUNICATOR, May, 1986.

5. Susan Tyler Eastman, "A Model for Telecommunications Education," paper presented to the Central States Speech Association, Cincinnati, Ohio, April, 1986.

6. PLANNING FOR CURRICULAR CHANGE IN JOURNALISM EDUCATION, University of Oregon, p. 1.

7. University of Oregon, p. 5.

8. David H. Weaver, REPORT AND EVALUATION: THE AMERICAN JOURNALIST SEMINAR, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, September, 1986.

9. Robert O. Blanchard and William G. Christ, "In Search of the Unit Core," JOURNALISM EDUCATOR, Autumn, 1985.

10. University of Oregon, p. 1.